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The cultural politics of the supernatural in Theravada Buddhist Thailand

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A long-standing and persistent line of criticism in the social sciences strongly doubts, when it is not explicitly denying, the comparative value of the category 'supernatural'. Perhaps most famously advanced by Emile Durkheim (1947:24–29), this position also includes notable scholars of religion such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1983:30–31), A. Irving Hallowell (1960:28), Peter Worsley (1968:xxxiii) and many others. Typically, this critique finds the concept to be unavoidably ethnocentric, covertly smuggling into description and analysis unstated metaphysical or ontological presuppositions held as self-evident in the West. One of these presuppositions is a clear and sharp distinction between a natural order of existence and a supernatural one. Many critics are quick to point out, however, that throughout the world there are numerous cosmologies that either do not make such a distinction or do not conceive of it as sharp and absolute. Another covert presupposition is that only the natural order, and the causal laws defining it, are real and can provide true explanations of events and behaviour. Again, many critics reject this stance as biased and widely rejected by many peoples. Consequently, given the anthropological goal of cross-culturally sensitive interpretation and explanation, the fundamental problem with the category 'supernatural' for many scholars is that it implicitly presumes scientific naturalism and materialism to be universal standards upon which to build comparison and analysis. As Morton Klass (1995:32) succinctly explains it, 'the dichotomizing of natural as against supernatural ... remains invincibly ethnocentric and therefore unsuitable for anthropological analysis'.

I confess to finding these criticisms very persuasive. There are three additional reasons, however, why I think anthropologists should find the term 'supernatural' problematic in cross-cultural analysis. In the first place, it has been a terribly imprecise analytic concept because most scholars typically fail to specify clearly the substantive meaning of 'supernatural' as a category of description or analysis. The range of referents discovered after even a short perusal of the academic literature is remarkable. 'Divine', 'mysterious', 'sacred', 'miraculous', 'unusual', 'transcendent', 'extraordinary', 'surpassing understanding', 'mystical'—these are just some of the referential options employed by scholars.

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Moreover, scholars who employ the term 'supernatural' in ethnographic work rarely specify explicitly the descriptive or analytic category, or categories, to which 'supernatural' is opposed. While the conventional opposites of 'mysterious' (explicable), 'sacred' (profane), and 'extraordinary' (ordinary) are usually implicitly clear, the logical contrasts of other potential cognates such as 'mystical' or 'miraculous' are less obvious. In fact, Klass makes clear that in the most general sense supernaturalism is opposed to naturalism, yet anthropologists typically have been as imprecise about the meaning of 'natural' in their ethnographic setting, in either emic or etic terms, as they have been about 'supernatural'.

Second, the analytic imprecision of 'supernatural' is further magnified because most scholars also fail to explain and justify why this particular term is more appropriate or useful than other potential concepts or analogies. As a result, it is rare to find a sustained discussion of the logical benefits of using 'supernatural' instead of, say, 'transcendent' or 'sacred', much less serious reflection on what general conditions, contexts or circumstances would make certain conceptual and terminological choices more appropriate or useful than others. The most sustained discussion I have seen of why 'supernatural' is more appropriate than other options in a given ethnographic context is Hultkrantz's (1983) effort to show that the idea of the supernatural is central to Native American religious thought and behaviour. In contrast to most scholars, Hultkrantz clearly lays out in some detail the arguments of those who deny the value of the category 'supernatural', and then proceeds critically to interrogate these positions in order to show why he believes they are wrong.

While I am not always convinced by Hultkrantz's arguments, I do understand quite clearly—in contrast to most scholars—what he means by 'supernatural' and why he values it analytically. What I find less encouraging, however, is the actual working definition of 'supernatural' within Native American religions—'belonging to another order of existence'—that he ultimately arrives at after this comparative exercise. I find this rendering of 'supernatural' to be stripped down, vague and substantively empty as a meaningful category in either a descriptive taxonomy or any interpretive or explanatory analysis. As a category of cross-cultural investigation, it is unclear to me how this is an improvement over other options. Both of these problems concerning analytic precision, in fact, support a general conclusion that Benson Saler (1993:124) has previously arrived at: 'While a case can be made for its [the supernatural's] analogical utility in transcultural research, the strength of such a case depends on how well the ground is prepared for the drawing of an analogy'. Unfortunately and typically, the ground has not been well prepared.

A third reason why I find the category 'supernatural' problematic is that its use generally indicates a primary, if not exclusive, focus on belief, cosmology, worldview and cognition in the constitution of religious experience. Discussions

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employing the term 'supernatural' tend to emphasise classificatory systems through which objects and intentional agents in a particular behavioural environment are defined and sorted. What is typically paid less attention, however, are the embodied practices and social institutions that also define any given religious universe, and that are equally central to the constitution of any object or experience as supernatural in particular, or even religious in general. Moreover, analyses employing the category 'supernatural' rarely seem to analyse how, in a specific sociocultural environment, the referent or set of referents for the category might have changed over time. Consequently, there is little sense of how the concept 'supernatural' has evolved through time, or of its production and use in history by certain actors with particular interests and agendas. It is this politics of the supernatural, however, which I find most interesting and which I explore in the next section of my paper.[1]

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An historical and ethnographic case

Contemporary Thai society has an idea of the 'supernatural', although its meaning is ambiguous and imprecise in instructive ways. Yet Thais did not always have such an idea, and the history of its emergence and the elaborated debates around it are, I would argue, instructive, as we reflect on the value of the category in cross-cultural research more generally. Those few scholars who have examined this question in any detail have found that pre-modern religiosity in Siam did not recognise the modern Western category of 'supernatural' within its integrated syncretism of pre-Buddhist, Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies, institutions and disciplinary practices (Jackson 1989:43–47, 57–61; Reynolds 1976).[2] This syncretism was periodically challenged, however, by elite-led efforts of religious purification intended to propagate more authoritative redactions of the central Buddhist scriptures and to install more legitimate lineages of monastic succession.

Around the mid-nineteenth century, there emerged a sustained movement of religious reform initiated by a royal son, Mongkut, who subsequently became king. Pursuing the traditional goal of purification, Mongkut founded a new lineage of ordination, which became an organisationally and ideologically distinct sect, the Thammayut, within the loosely structured pluralism of Siamese Buddhism (Reynolds 1972). Mongkut's indigenous concern with purifying Buddhism of non-Buddhist accretions and syncretic developments, however, was also influenced by his increasing exposure to Western missionaries and intellectuals, who were becoming more common in Siam at this time. His exposure to their claims regarding the superiority of Christianity and Western science, and the ideologies of rationalism, empiricism and naturalism that underlay this triumphalism, subtly influenced his own vision of Buddhist revival and reformation (Ishii 1986:154–160; Jackson 1989:43–47; Reynolds 1976; Tambiah

1976:212–215, 406–407). Thus, his attacks on sacrifice, ritualism and improper monastic practice in the pursuit of a more authentic Buddhism also carried associations of a defence of Siamese Buddhism against popular irrationality and cultural backwardness.

These developments set the stage for a multifaceted project of cultural reform that dominated Siamese history for the next century, as an absolutist monarchy sought to avoid colonisation by the West. One prong of this cultural project centred on the creation and institutionalisation of a rational, systematised and bourgeois Buddhism, which was textual in orientation and respectable on the world stage. This modernist Buddhism was rooted in the Thammayut reforms, which were accepted as normative by influential Bangkok-centred elites and propagated through a new educational and administrative reorganisation of the Buddhist monastic tradition. This reformed Buddhism asserted it was more rational and empirical than Christianity and fully compatible with modern science. As such, it involved the selective purging of cosmological beliefs and ritual practices that were retrospectively perceived as improper syncretic accretions, which, over time, had obscured the fundamental rationality of Buddhism.

A second prong in this reformation of Siamese Buddhism involved a defence against 'internal' challenges to the consolidation of a newly envisioned pure and respectable Buddhism. Pre-Buddhist and Hindu religious elements were, therefore, increasingly likely to be defined as irrational, animistic, magical and/or supernatural, all characteristics now conceived as foreign to the fundamental original core of authentic Buddhism. Popular beliefs and practices centring on spiritual entities and powers not recognised as fully legitimate in the newly revised Buddhist canon-–ghosts, spirits, gods, protective amulets, magical mantras, and so on—were especially likely targets for repudiation. At best, these ideas and the practices associated with them were envisioned as necessary illusions for those at the beginning of the Buddhist path to enlightenment, mistakes that would be left behind with spiritual progress. Yet, since identification with this austere reform Buddhism was primarily limited to royalty and other modernising elites, the Siamese state did not pursue any widespread, systematic campaigns of eradication against unorthodox beliefs and practices. Rather, tactics of repudiation, subordination and stigmatisation were usually pursued when more aggressive reform was impossible. The result was a persisting stew of heterogeneous popular beliefs and practices, which were understood by the hegemonic centre as heterodox, illegitimate, backward and superstitious, but which were ultimately impossible to uproot.

The historical consequences of this cultural heritage of ideological and institutional domination by a modernist vision of Theravada Buddhism are evident in many elite criticisms of contemporary Thai spirit mediumship. The notion that individuals can become possessed by gods, and miraculously heal

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various personal and medical problems, is commonly characterised by religious and non-religious elites alike as a deceptive irrationality, which mistakenly relies on supernatural entities that do not really exist. Rather than being properly Buddhist in nature, it is instead characterised as descended from a backward and primitive animistic supernaturalism. Description and judgment converge as the critics of spirit mediums quickly and imperceptibly slide from claims that possession involves the supernatural to assertions that it is all just superstitious irrationality. Spirit mediums and those who defend them respond in part by appealing to older and more traditional syncretic understandings of ritual practice and cosmological order, in order to justify the existence and real efficacious presence in the mundane world of divinities and spirits. In addition, they perceive these miraculous interventions as beneficial to humanity and supportive of a Buddhism that should be concerned with alleviating the mundane suffering of the laity, in addition to fostering the transcendent liberation of monastic virtuosos. They do not perceive themselves as before or outside Buddhism, but rather as devout followers and virtuous supporters of the Buddhist faith. While admitting that they are intimately involved with supernatural entities and powers, they adamantly deny that they are mixed up in superstition or irrationality.

These contrasting interpretations of possession and spirit mediums in Thailand are each supported by the currently diverse range of synonyms available in the Thai language for translating the English word 'supernatural'. One dictionary (Wit 1994:1395) lists these synonyms as 'beyond nature', involving: 'things magical and miraculous', 'miracle-supporting power', 'the sacred and holy', 'things strange, wonderful or surprising', 'the extraordinary and marvellous', 'spirits and gods'. Interestingly, in this case the overlap between Thai and English in semantic terms of reference for 'supernatural' is striking, revealing the hegemonic cultural influence in Thailand of a modernist reform Buddhism, which is subtly informed by Western rationalism and naturalism. More importantly, however, current Thai debates over spirit mediums as instantiations of the supernatural are about more than simply which semantic referent is being employed. These debates are also fundamentally shaped by highly charged and contentious moral assertions about what transcendent powers humanity can rely on, as well as when, how and why people should do so. They revolve around motivated and pragmatic claims and counterclaims about the proper relation of spirituality to mundane social life, about what constitutes authentic and valued religious experience, and about which practices of spiritual discipline lead to the cultivation of proper moral virtue, authentic charisma, and true enlightenment. Without understanding the history of social and ideological conflicts that shape current Thai assertions about the supernatural, however, one is likely to misunderstand the full symbolic meaning and social significance of the category as it is used in contemporary Thai society.

Concluding reflections

If the category 'supernatural' is to prove useful in future anthropological research, I would argue that three conditions need to be met to improve its explanatory value in any description or analysis.[3] First, anthropological uses of 'supernatural' need to be informed by a critical genealogy of the changing historical meaning and use of the term in two distinct senses. Anthropologists initially need to examine more closely the meaning and use of 'supernatural' in the Western intellectual tradition, paying particular attention to how the idea has been differentially constituted within both elite and popular understandings.[4] Wilfred Cantwell Smith's (1962) classic discussion of the changing meaning of 'religion' and Talal Asad's (1993) more recent investigations into the shifting conceptions of, and practices associated with, 'ritual' provide helpful models upon which such a critical genealogy could be based.[5] In addition, anthropologists also need to make a parallel effort to understand the genealogy of the concept 'supernatural' and its associated terms, if and when they find them in the cultures they are studying. When genealogically investigating the idea of the supernatural in either Western or non-Western contexts, critical attention needs to be paid to both convergences and contradictions between beliefs and practices associated with the idea of the supernatural, as well as general historical shifts in its meaning and use.

Second, anthropologists must attend more carefully to the motivations of particular actors in particular sociocultural contexts when they make pragmatic appeals to, and use of, the idea of the supernatural. Statements about the supernatural by informants, when they do occur, are rarely simply claims of transparent referentiality and uninterested description. Rather, they are also typically pragmatic acts of interpersonal communication, in which particular people are trying to achieve and produce particular social consequences: to shape their immediate cultural world in ways they perceive to be beneficial, virtuous or necessary. Thus, in the contemporary Thai context, references concerning the supernatural typically index efforts designed to confer legitimacy or ascribe stigma, to gain a voice for the authentic or impose silence on the unauthentic, to assert civility and modernity or impute barbarism and backwardness. Given the multiple and underdetermined meanings associated with Thai supernaturalism, deciphering this complex pattern of references, meanings, uses and goals is challenging. Yet attending to these complexities helps to clarify how authentic and unauthentic religious experience is constituted and validated within contemporary Thai Theravada Buddhism, as well as to explain the social processes underlying this cultural politics of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

Third, anthropologists can increase the value of the category 'supernatural' by recognising that it need not carry so much analytic and descriptive weight all on its own. I would suggest that we explicitly recognise and acknowledge its

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underdetermined meaning and plural associations as both an emic and an etic category. In this sense, I believe, it is better to think of it as one term in a shifting family of related concepts, or as one overarching category that includes under it a multitude of potentially contrasting concepts. The goal, then, would be to map out the complex logical and performative associations within this family of terms in specific cultural contexts and particular social histories. Conceptualised in this way, discussions of how our informants employ and redeploy the category 'supernatural' would elucidate general social patterns and rules in the use and application of related terms within this loose semantic field. Our analyses should also be sensitive to the historical continuities and discontinuities evident in these patterns and rules of use. These conclusions could then be self-consciously compared with patterns and rules discernible in the West's own complex definition and application of the concept, an act of cross-cultural comparison that would ultimately better illuminate both our own social worlds and those of our informants.

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NOTES

1. Kendall (2001) innovatively examines similar questions in Korea.

2. A more thorough historical discussion of the category 'supernatural' in Thai Theravada Buddhism would first need to preface any specific discussion of the Thai case with a detailed genealogical investigation of the idea of the supernatural in both Buddhism generally and its discrete philosophical schools and transcultural historical traditions or 'vehicles'—Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana—more specifically. This historical contextualisation is important since, as a non-monotheistic religion, Buddhism's metaphysical and ontological presuppositions concerning the transmundane and the transcendent are distinct from those found within the Christian tradition, which has so deeply informed the modern Western understanding of 'supernatural', including contemporary anthropological discourses about it.

3. The value of the category 'supernatural' might even be improved if scholars were more explicit about whether, in fact, they were primarily using it for either descriptive or analytic ends. Thus, is it being used in order to improve taxonomic precision in representing another cultural world as that world is understood by its inhabitants, such as when 'skyscraper' adds more descriptive precision than 'building'; or is it being used instead to deepen the analytic purchase of an interpretation or explanation, such as when 'unconscious' or 'oedipal' is added to the idea of psychological motivation? The distinction between descriptive and analytic uses is, of course, heuristic and is not meant to be absolute in any sense.

4. In their analyses, in fact, Western scholars discussing the supernatural rarely state explicitly whether they are working with specialised or general, elite or popular, understandings of the term. This is especially true when they are discussing the emic understandings of their informants. It is also true, however, when they discuss, if at all, the Western intellectual antecedents of their own usage, scholastic or otherwise. It is rare, as well, to find recognition of the fact that the idea of the supernatural has undergone noteworthy changes in its meaning and usage across different historical epochs and under different regimes of knowledge—from Christian natural law, through Enlightenment

scientific materialism and Victorian social evolutionism, to contemporary modernist (and post-modernist) relativism.

5. For an interesting reflection on Smith's classic and controversial text, which succinctly brings out the analytic differences between Smith's and Asad's genealogical projects, see Asad (2001).

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